

C28 Spreads the Good Word

Riverside, Calif.-based retailer also expands its NOTW apparel line into wholesale

By ADAM TSCHORN

RIVERSIDE, Calif. — Three and a half years after launching a chain of Christian-oriented C28 apparel and accessory retail stores in southern California, owner and chief executive Aurelio Barretto 3rd is taking his message to mainstream surf and skate shops nationwide.

The NOTW merchandise—the abbreviation refers to “Not Of This World,” a Biblical phrase referring to Jesus and others from the heavenly realm—comprises roughly 50 percent of Barretto’s inventory and features bold designs that click with kids. At first glance the logo resembles a jagged-edge Batman badge or a stylized medieval battle-ax. Upon closer examination, the letter “O” is tilted on its side to resemble a halo and the “T” is elongated into the shape of a cross.

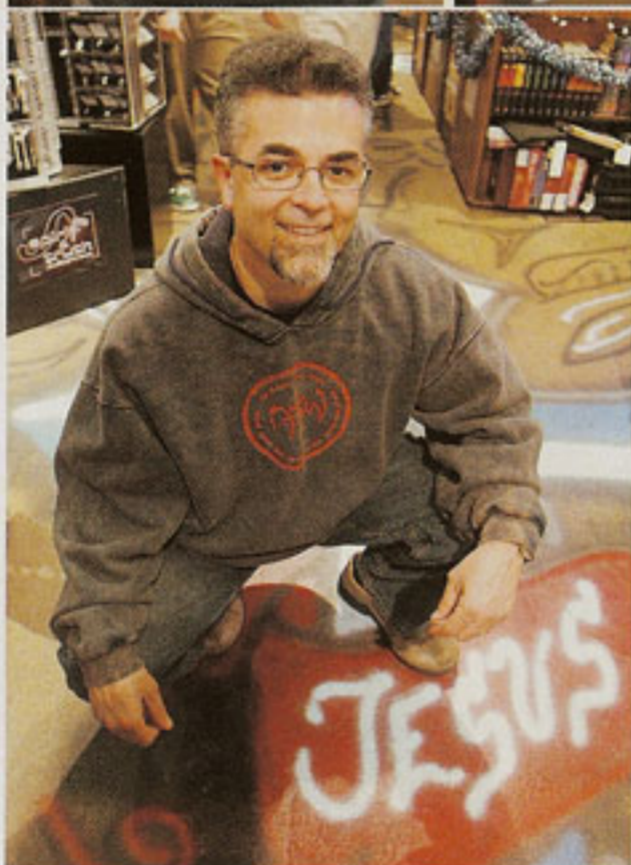
Much of the NOTW apparel is that way—on first glance it resembles the same hip teen-oriented merchandise on the racks at Hot Topic or PacSun, but a second glance reveals religious images, Bible passages and Christian slogans subtly—and not so subtly—screened on T-shirts, sewn into sweats and emblazoned on belt buckles.

On each collar tag is the scripture that inspired the store’s name, Colossians 2:8: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”

“That has meaning to me,” Barretto said in a recent interview at his Riverside headquarters. “I ran a \$60 million business, sold it, walked away with \$20 million and then realized that money couldn’t buy me happiness. That’s when I came to Christ.” Barretto, who had made his fortune marketing an igloo-shaped doghouse called the Dogloo, cashed out in 1997 and immediately felt something was missing. He found religion in 1998 and, after discovering inspiration in a Christian bookstore, found himself at the crossroads of religion and retail.

Barretto now has stores in five southern California malls—the Galleria at Tyler in Riverside, Promenade Mall in Temecula, Main Place Mall in Santa Ana, Parkway Plaza in El Cajon and North County Fair Mall in Escondido. At an average of 1,600 square feet, he said the stores gross just over \$3 million a year, with a per-square-foot average of \$375.

The exposed brick walls and graffiti-tagged cement floors feel more like old tenement than New Testament, and the urban-industrial-looking stores showcase equal parts trendy men’s and women’s apparel, including T-shirts, track pants, hoodies, sweatshirts and accessories that retail from \$20 to \$42. Designs range from a simple screened NOTW logo and slogans like “Jesus Freak” or “Daddyz Girl,” to stylized images of Jesus suffering on the cross. Barretto acknowledges the similarities with mall stalwart Hot Topic, “but with the opposite message.”



TO CROSS THE BREACH BETWEEN RELIGIOUS IMAGERY AND HIP APPAREL, AURELIO BARRETTO 3RD WORKS IN SOME MYSTERIOUS WAYS.



The stores carry other apparel and accessory lines that, Barretto feels, share C28’s message of a “clean and positive Christian lifestyle” including Ezekiel, Soul Dog, Onetruth and Truth Soul Armor. Though Barretto and head designer Abe Hernandez are jointly responsible for all of NOTW’s design and style ideas, they ultimately credit the man upstairs. “When I say it’s God-inspired, I’m not kidding,” said Hernandez. “Truly, there are a lot of times when we just sit and we pray.”

Barretto said the C28 chain has yet to turn a profit, something he had planned to do by the end of 2004, and current plans include adding two or three stores a year and expanding his retail presence beyond California’s borders. “I’m negotiating with four southern California malls right now,” he said. “We’ll double the company in two years.” In the meantime he’s decided to preach his brand of retail evangelism wholesale by putting the NOTW line in other retail doors.

In late October, C28 started shipping 15 styles of NOTW-wear with slogans like “King of Kings,” “Lord of Kings,” “Bad Company Corrupts” and “I am with Jesus” to shops in seven states. Although most of the initial orders were to Christian-themed book and music stores, Barretto said he’s fielded inquiries from traditional skate and surf shops too, “but they’re mostly mom & pops,” he said.

However, he expects wholesale to surpass retail at some point, “and the ultimate goal would be to get into Nordstrom and Macy’s and stores like that.” His first-year goal is to position the NOTW brand in a “couple of hundred” stores and he’s been pleased with the initial response: “Some of our stores have doubled up on their second orders.”

One of those stores is One Eighty Boardshop, a Christian-oriented surf and skate shop in Kahului, Hawaii. Owner Chris Akahoshi, familiar with the line from his days in southern California, placed a small test order for four men’s and four women’s shirt styles and a selection of hats and belt buckles. “It’s done very well,” said Akahoshi. “I sold \$800 dollars worth in the first month. There are a lot of Christian skater kids and surf kids who want to wear cool, appealing alternative clothes. They want to represent.”

Whether or not NOTW reaches beyond the faithful, Barretto’s sights are already set on what he deems to be the “dream” wholesale account: “I’d love to be in PacSun. Offering kids something positive and clean. All those brands in there now just mean the same thing.” ■